Vessels

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Vessels

by jonnimir

Summary

Hannibal follows the trail left by several of his would-be victims who mysteriously vanished in rural Virginia, and gets stranded in the middle of nowhere. When he accepts the help of a stranger, things take an unnerving turn.

Notes

For Kinkterror Week 4: Paranormal (Folk Horror)

The tags are pretty spoilery but I just want to emphasize that this gets REALLY GORY and fucked, okay? It's horror, everyone gets hurt, abandon hope all ye who enter here, etc, etc.

See the end of the work for more notes

Hunting humans required a good deal of foresight and preparation, preferably including a fair amount of tracking and surveillance to establish patterns and know the best times to strike. It was a process that Hannibal had become very good at over the years, becoming highly tuned to the movements of his prey. So it didn't take long for him realize when something disrupted those patterns in a way he couldn't explain—something that tugged them out of their usual circles of travel, and then made them vanish without a trace. Would-be-victim after would-be-victim, all vanishing somewhere in rural Virginia.

With a combination of bemusement and annoyance at his prey seemingly being poached out from under him, he ended up driving through the region with a careful eye on anything that seemed out of place. It was a long distance from Baltimore; a long distance from anything, frankly. The last signal from the GPS tracker he had placed on the car of his last target led him to absolutely nothing, nothing but empty winding road and woods for miles.

He was just starting to doubt he'd ever come across signs of human habitation on this road when his car gave an alarming groan and began to slow of its own accord.

He pulled over to the side of the road and tried to identify the problem, but nothing was obviously awry under the hood. It seemed as if the car had just decided of its own accord to stop.

He took out his phone to call for assistance, but the bars were resolutely flat. No service of any kind, even when he walked in a broad circle around the car. And by his estimation, he was miles away from the nearest town. No sound of nearby traffic, only an unseasonably loud racket of cicadas.

He frowned, the strangeness of the situation putting him on his guard. He had orchestrated car trouble for his victims in the past in order to corner them, and his car breaking down in the same place his quarry had disappeared was too much of a coincidence.

Still, he had little option but to try waving down the first car that passed by—a rundown white pickup truck driven by a scruffy man in green flannel.

"Car trouble?" the man asked.

"Unfortunately so. And I can't seem to get a signal to call for assistance. Do you get any reception in this area?"

"Afraid not. This whole stretch of highway is more or less a dead zone. You might get dots of reception along it, but nothing reliable."

Hannibal exhaled slowly, trying to suppress his growing agitation at being stranded, helpless, and clueless.

"Do you need a lift?" the man asked. "I have a landline, and I live just a couple miles down the road. You could call for help from there."

Though still somewhat wary, Hannibal nodded. The alternative was a long walk that would surely wear him out and leave him more vulnerable, or waiting for another car on a road that seemed very rarely traveled. “That would be much appreciated, thank you.”

“I’m Will, by the way,” the man said, glancing over at him as he settled into the car.

“Hannibal,” he replied. “Pleased to meet you, though the circumstances may be less than ideal.”

Will nodded, eyes fixed on the road. He didn’t seem terribly inclined toward idle chatter, but Hannibal occupied himself during the short drive by trying to determine the components of the distinctly herbal scent in the car. The fact that he struggled to identify them meant they must have been very rare, nothing used in the culinary world. He was just about to give up and inquire about the smell when Will turned onto what was ostensibly a gravel driveway, yet was so thoroughly worn and eroded that it was mostly dirt interspersed with pebbles. It wound through even thicker woods, until it opened into a clearing with a strangely quaint white farmhouse. It didn’t look as run-down as the car might have led him to expect, but it certainly looked very old—colonial, even.

He got out of the car, looking around. “It’s a nice property,” he commented. “Have you lived here long?”

Will nodded. “Grew up here. It’s been in my family for centuries.”

As they approached the house, a pack of large dogs appeared around the corner and rushed to greet Will, though they fixed Hannibal with considerably more suspicious looks. They had a wolfish look about them, with shaggy grey coats and amber eyes. Will whistled and pointed at the house and they eased back like a tide, trotting back toward the front door.

On closer inspection of the porch posts, what he had assumed from a distance were random scratches or dirt were actually small symbols etched into the paint. They looked somewhat like runes, but he didn’t have the expertise to decipher them.

Will caught him staring, but made no comment.

“Your handiwork?” Hannibal asked, nodding at the posts. “I don’t recognize the symbols.”

Will smiled slightly, looking a touch smug. “Just some precautions,” he said enigmatically. “Please, come in.”

The awareness that he was missing out on the full picture was an uncomfortable itch, but he went along with him. It was unlikely to be important.

The inside of the house was somewhat sparse, with more of an eye toward practicality than creature comforts. Hannibal noted there was no television, nor any other visible electronics. There were, however, several sturdy bookcases crammed with weathered spines, titles worn down until they were nearly impossible to read. On the left wall there was a fireplace with the coals still glowing orange.

The dogs settled near the fireplace, watching the two of them very carefully.

“Who are you planning to call?” Will asked. “You got Triple A?”

“Yes.”

Will grunted. “Could take a long time for them to them to get to you. People have a tendency to get lost if they’re not from around here. If you don’t want to be waiting ‘til midnight, you’re better off talking to my friend Joe—he has an auto shop in Wolf Trap, the nearest town over. He’s good at what he does, and his prices are fair.”

Hannibal hesitated a moment, still alert to the strangeness of the situation. But he still needed to satisfy his curiosity about the disappearance, and if Will had anything to do with them, it would be counterproductive to try to hasten his departure.

“If that’s what you recommend. You have his number?”

Will nodded. “I’ll give him a call for you. Go ahead and make yourself comfortable.”

He left the room, and Hannibal could hear his muffled voice as he made the call. Rather than taking a seat, as Will had probably intended, he was far more interested in inspecting the room’s contents.

He walked over to the bookshelves and found little that was familiar. Many of the titles indicated they were field guides to local plants and animals, including what seemed to be an exhaustive manual on fungi. Others were leather-bound and bore no words on their spines. They looked quite old and potentially fragile, and despite his curiosity, he didn’t want to risk damaging them by unshelving them and looking inside.

He moved across the room and the dogs tracked his movement with their heads. He wondered if having a visitor was an unusual occurrence for them. They seemed well-trained, but wary.

By the front window there was a cluttered table, which on closer examination was covered with what looked like fishing lures. A magnifying glass stood with a lure suspending in front of it, and Hannibal bent in to look more closely. It had bits of feather—not the bright, dyed feathers he associated with lures, but natural, from something sparrow-like—bound tightly with fine string, or perhaps synthetic threading or horse hair, given the sheen. Small off-white fragments protruded from the thread in places, and it wasn’t until he found a matching pile of half-inch-long rods on the table that he could be certain they were bones—presumably from some kind of rodent.

His hand was halfway to touching the unusual ornament when Will’s voice made him startle.

“I wouldn’t recommend that.”

He turned to see Will in the doorway, arms crossed and expression inscrutable.

Hannibal inclined his head in an imitation of slight chagrin. “It was rude of me to overstep my boundaries as a guest, I apologize. I was simply curious—I’ve never seen a fishing lure

quite like that before, if I'm correct in assuming that's what it is?"

"It's a lure," Will said with a slight nod. "And that hook's sharp enough to split a man clean open. I'd hate to see you bleeding all over the floor."

There was something less than compassionate in his tone that gave Hannibal pause, but he pulled away from the lure.

"I'll be sure to be more careful in the future." He considered asking about the materials, but Will didn't look like he would be receptive at the moment. Instead he asked, "Did you have luck contacting your friend?"

"Yeah. Says he'll be able to get there in an hour. I'll drive you back over when he calls to let us know he's on his way."

"You've been very accommodating. I can't thank you enough for your help."

His manners usually put his audience in a good mood, but Will, though he had been kind, seemed immune—or even somewhat uncomfortable with the additional thanks.

"It's no trouble," he said, settling back into a chair. He clicked his tongue and gestured at one of his dogs, who quickly stood and ambled toward him to receive some scratches behind its ear.

"It's rare that I'm caught so unprepared for a mishap like this," Hannibal said. "I had my car inspected very recently, and I wasn't able to find the source of the problem when it broke down. It's odd."

"'Odd' is par for the course around here."

"How so? Do you often find strangers having mysterious accidents?"

Will chuckled slightly. "You make it sound so sinister. Nah. It's just a result of everything being so old and far from the nearest semblance of civilization."

"Not many out-of-town visitors passing through, I take it."

Will nodded.

"Have you seen any recently? I had a friend who was headed in this direction about a week ago, on a hunting trip. But I haven't heard back from her since, and I've been worried she might have run into some trouble."

"Haven't noticed anyone like that. Just you."

After a few moments of silence, Will seeming to be a man of few words, Hannibal asked, "Do you hunt as well as fish? I imagine the location is perfect for it."

Will nodded slowly, and turned his attention away from his dog and back to Hannibal. "I hunt on occasion, but I prefer the elegance of a lure. Much more rewarding to have prey walk right

into your trap than to go trekking halfway across the state to stalk it, don't you think?"

The phrasing gave him pause, but he had heard similar debates carried out before.

"As long as one's lure is effective. It can require a great deal of patience if not. Hunting is more proactive. Tracking prey gives some degree of satisfaction even before you make the kill."

"Spoken like a true hunter," Will said, a small smile on his lips.

"I've hunted since my youth," Hannibal said, half-truths coming naturally to him. "I've developed a certain fondness for it."

"And do you hunt for food or sport?" He tilted his head slightly. "You don't strike me as the outdoors type, no offense."

"None taken. It's true I rarely go far from the city nowadays, but I'm no trophy hunter—all of my kills are destined to wind up in my belly. And you?"

Will stroked the stubble on his chin. "It's more a matter of pragmatism than need. Keeping the rumbles of hunger at bay. Appeasing what needs to be appeased. Keeping some kind of order in these woods."

The phrasing again gave him pause. "You've taken it upon yourself to be its caretaker, then."

"More like it chose me for the task."

"You speak as though the forest has a mind of its own."

Will smirked. "Anyone who grew up with these woods wouldn't doubt that for a second."

Hannibal was of course familiar with how such perceptions could form—he had, as a child, had a similar sense of the forest around his home as having their own power, foreboding and terrible. But the lowest point of his life had revealed nothing supernatural to fear, no bogeyman seeking to trick or torment him, only the monsters of humanity lurking in the midst of famine and ice. He no longer gave any credence to such perceptions, but he wouldn't be so uncouth as to directly contradict one holding such beliefs.

Instead he nodded politely and asked, "May I use your restroom while I wait?"

"Sure. Upstairs, hang right. First door."

Hannibal climbed up the narrow flight of stairs, which creaked underfoot like they had been lain hundreds of years ago. Dust motes floated through the beam of light from the window at the top of the stairs, and when he reached it he paused.

Little dolls hung in front of the glass. At first Hannibal just saw the backlit shape of them, crude and blocky, but on closer inspection he saw they were made of bone, twine, and dried mud, with snail shells stuck in the place of their eyes and dried grasses sticking out wildly like tangled hair. Though there was no precise reason to be alarmed by their presence, they

made him uneasy. An unusual choice of décor, to complement the unusual materials in his lures. Not something a child made, surely, and Will showed no inclination to add whimsy to his home décor—which meant there was a different reason for them to be there. Like the runes on the porch.

He looked beyond them into the backyard and noted a large ring of stones with the ground within burnt to black and littered with charred branches, and two parallel lines of small stones that outlined a path to the edge of the woods. The tree line was sudden and dense, mixed old growth of sprawling pine trees and hardwood.

He was curious in a way that was rare, nowadays. Whoever this man was, there was clearly more to him than he had first assumed.

He found nothing strange in the bathroom, at least. When he returned downstairs, however, he found only the dogs waiting for him, amber eyes fixed on his every movement. Their attention made him somewhat wary, but they seemed to have no interest in badgering him.

He thought nothing of Will's absence at first, reviewing the lures on the table again—from a more respectful distance, this time—and looking out the window, noticing a slight duskiness to the sky. He waited.

And he waited, pacing the floor and watching the light grow dimmer outside, until his watch told him it had been over thirty minutes since he had last seen Will, and a combination of impatience and curiosity forced him to investigate.

He wandered down the first-floor hallway and into a small kitchen with an attached dining nook. The counters were almost entirely clean, but he smelled blood. He followed his nose to the sink, where he found a bloodied cutting board and hunting knife. With a deeper sniff, his best guess was rabbit. Fairly fresh.

He turned back and found one of the dogs sitting in the kitchen doorway, its bulk blocking his path.

"You're being much more attentive to your visitor than your owner has been," he commented.

The dog tilted its head, and didn't move an inch.

Something about the very intent way it was staring at him made him reluctant to try to push past it into the living room, and he noticed there was a door to the backyard through the dining area. He walked through it and closed the door behind him before the dog could follow.

It barked once, loudly, then he heard the click of its nails walking away.

He turned to survey the backyard. It was darker now, true dusk, and someone had set a fire in the pit. It glowed orange, and a loud crack sent sparks rushing into the air.

“Will?” he called out, walking toward it. He must have been nearby if he recently lit the fire, but he was nowhere in sight. Hannibal listened, but any answering voice was covered by the buzzing shriek of cicadas that filled the air.

Getting closer, he saw embers burning hot and red in the middle of the fire pit, and a few branches with low flame licking around them. The pit crackled.

He was perplexed, unable to fathom what kind of game Will might be playing, and the confusion led into irritation and a slight anxiety. Without Will, he was entirely stranded, and unable to retrieve his car. He hadn’t heard a phone ring or any kind of commotion, so he had no idea what might have drawn Will away so suddenly.

He looked toward the house and saw no additional lights that might indicate Will was still in the house. He turned his head toward the woods and squinted. It looked like there was another light in there, faint, like the glow of a torch.

With few options left, he decided to follow it. It was getting dark, and he only had the light of his phone as backup, but it seemed his best lead. And as far as he knew, Virginia wasn’t known for its dangerous wildlife. Perhaps a placid black bear, or coyotes at worst.

He followed the path indicated by the stones on the ground, leading away from the firepit and into the tree line, where they continued to mark a path through the underbrush.

There was a chill in the air, and he sincerely hoped this quest wouldn’t take him terribly far into the woods. Though the path was marked by stones, it was narrow, and his range of vision poor. He could see the light moving slightly in the distance, as if it was being carried, weaving back and forth like his own winding path. But there was still no response when he called Will’s name, though he had little doubt that he was the one carrying the light.

There was suddenly a larger flare of light ahead, like a fire had been lit, and he followed the path until its shapeless glow resolved itself into the distinct form of flames, casting long flickering shadows among the dense trees. He could tell it was in a clearing, now, and he hesitated before getting closer. He saw the silhouette of a man moving around the fire in a circle, but he made no attempt to call. Caution held his tongue; the situation had now escalated beyond slightly unusual, and his animal hindbrain was prickling with warning.

He shifted slightly off the trail to try to get a better view while remaining behind a broad tree trunk, but the forest was very dense here, and it limited his view, with many branches of younger trees still in the way. Still, he could see between some of those branches the crude outlines of dolls like the ones in the window, dangling on strings like hanged men in nooses.

He sniffed the air. It had been decades since he’d last smoldered wood chips in a fire to peruse their scent, but the associations came quickly. Burnt willow, yew, and walnut; some herbs that were less familiar, but reminiscent of anise and cumin; and somewhere in the background, olive oil and human sweat. Not the most common of items for a bonfire.

The wind shifted, and instead of ushering the scent of the clearing into his nose it came from behind him. He turned his head quickly at a distinctly canine smell.

No less than three of Will's hounds stood in the path behind him, coats difficult to discern against the dark forest undergrowth, but eyes reflecting like green opal in the light from the fire. With the cicadas buzzing, he hadn't heard them walking behind him, and they hadn't so much as snapped a twig—these were stealthy dogs, familiar with the path and intelligent enough to tread carefully on the quiet pine beds. They looked more wolfish than ever, and the hairs at the back of his neck prickled. He could defend himself against an attack, of course, but their teeth boded poorly for his chance of survival without injury.

A familiar voice came from the clearing: "I know you're there. You might as well join me, my pack has the path well-guarded."

"And here I thought we were playing a very elaborate game of hide-and-seek."

He made his way back onto the path, giving the hounds a fair berth, and walked the final stretch into the clearing.

Will was standing by the fire, which was raging in a huge stone pit, and was bare except for a satchel he wore over his shoulder. Hannibal took note of more stone formations around the edge of the clearing, larger than the ones by the house—cairns marking four points. The ground between was better kempt than the forest floor around it, with no spare pebbles or sticks littering it. Instead, it looked as if a broom had swept it clean and left only bare tilled soil.

And in front of the furthest cairn, tied up on the ground and seemingly sedated, was his initial target, the woman he had tracked to this area. That solved one mystery, at least, and raised many more questions.

"Do you know what your problem is, Hannibal?" Will asked, as casually as if they were still in his living room. "Predators don't know how to respond to fear. You don't get that instinct to *flee* when you should. So you'll just walk right into the middle of something without hesitation, feeling assured of your safety."

"Should I take that as a threat?" Hannibal asked, watching carefully. Will's body bore none of the tension of one considering an attack, though he was lean and bore decent muscle.

"Just an observation. At what point during this evening do you think a normal person would have gotten uneasy? Can you recognize those points, even if you don't experience them?"

"I was somewhat wary about the conditions of my being stranded in the first place, but I wasn't about to be frightened away by a few unusual decorations, if that's what you're thinking of. Though I'm not sure how you're so certain I'm not normal. Or a predator, as you said."

Will scoffed. He circled the fire slowly, and Hannibal stiffened at the approach, though he did not run. Will had his hand in a light fist, but it seemed to be holding something, rather than being prepared to throw a punch.

"Don't sell yourself short," Will said, eyes fixed on Hannibal's. "The Chesapeake Ripper is far from ordinary. You wouldn't be here now if you weren't something special."

“Is that what all this about? A grasp for the Ripper’s identity? I’m not sure how you expect me to be of assistance.”

“No,” Will snapped. “Don’t act dumb. I’m not a cop or a judge, I’m not here to try you for your sins. I don’t even operate within a system that would denigrate your actions as sins. I know who you are. Just allow yourself a bit of your usual arrogance—if I’m right, I’m sure you imagine you could kill me and not risk your secret getting exposed.”

He didn’t seem at all frightened by that prospect, which suggested he was equally arrogant.

“May I ask how you came to this conclusion?”

“Well for one thing, you took the bait. Easy enough to lure prey off the beaten path, and the predator will follow. And in the first place—and the reason I knew your targets—it was because I was privy to some obscure information.”

“From what source?”

At first it looked like Will was rolling his eyes, but then he made a sweeping gesture at the forest around them. He took a stride closer as he did so. “I said the forest has a mind of its own. You just didn’t take me seriously.”

“The forest told you how to find me?”

This time Will did roll his eyes. “You don’t have to sound so… condescending. No. Saying the forest told me is like saying my lungs are talking to you right now. The forest is part of him, but he exists beyond it.”

“You perceive a spirit of sorts?”

“I don’t just perceive him—I serve him. And you are a gift I’ve been waiting to give him for a very long time. Someone strong and worthy.”

“A sacrifice?”

“Of sorts.” Will smiled. “Technically, you’re the first part of the gift. The second is a service I’ll provide.”

Will was nearly within striking distance now. He still wasn’t holding the tension of someone contemplating an attack, but his eyes were sharp with excitement, and Hannibal considered his angle of attack. The dogs could present a problem, but a fight seemed inevitable.

“What kind of service?”

“You’ll find out. Telling you anything more now would simply be indulging your procrastination, giving you time to find a way out. You just need to… relax.”

He clasped his hands together and Hannibal heard a rustle like tissue paper. He stepped quickly forward, prepared to disarm whatever weapon he may be holding, but Will threw his hand up and released a fine cloud of powder into Hannibal’s face.

He closed his eyes in time to avoid being blinded, but when he inhaled he coughed, lungs suddenly burning. He tried to orient himself through the discomfort and launch a blow, but his arm felt like it was swinging through water, and his head spun.

He staggered back on his heels and nearly fell, but Will caught him and escorted him more gently to the ground. Then he was dragged across the dirt floor, closer to the fire. He expected to pass out from whatever kind of drug had been administered, but he didn't, simply remained heavy-limbed and sedate as Will proceeded to dispassionately strip him of his clothes until he was fully nude.

He heard Will moving around him, murmuring something he couldn't make out, but he couldn't follow his movements. He heard something scratching through the dirt around him like a quill inscribing words in dust. He heard the fire crackle in contentment as it devoured something new, then smelled rabbit blood and the bitter ash of burnt herbs.

Will straddled him, backlit by flame, and the smell grew stronger. He saw blackened fingers raise to his face and felt the warm gritty concoction smeared over his forehead and cheeks in shapes he did not recognize, then down his chin and throat to his sternum.

Will mimicked the gesture on his own skin, then looked at him with an expression that was almost warm. "You'll see. He will fill you, then he will fill me. A vessel poured into a vessel. And I can bring his progeny into the mortal world."

He stood up and walked out of sight again, leaving Hannibal to think on that phrasing until a commotion caught his attention. He heard a slight scuffle, muffled cries, and the wet slice of steel through living flesh, and then a loud crash—and sparks flew high enough above the fire for him to see. It was not the end of the screaming, though it had dwindled by the time the smell of burnt flesh reached his nostrils.

Finally, Will reappeared with a length of metal, twisted into a shape at the end and glowing red from heat. Hannibal's heart sank at seeing it, and he felt cold despite the heat of the blazing fire. This was not to be a quick and painless sacrifice, then.

"His sign will mark you," Will said, softly. "And pain will open your mind to receive him."

He closed his eyes, gritted his teeth, and thrust his mind as quickly as possible into a sheltering room of his memory palace, but he still felt the skin of his thigh sizzle and split under the brand. It was a mind-splitting pain that would have wracked his body in agony if he had any control over it at all.

The brand was removed. With his eyes closed, he wasn't prepared for a second brand, this time applied so low on his stomach that his pubic hair burned and adrenaline overcame his mental defenses, sure that his genitals would soon be scorched.

Pain and fear collided together to wipe his mind utterly clear, vision white and ears ringing.

And then he felt something that was previously unknown to him. A weight in his head as if his brain had ossified, a crackling of ice and fire along his nerves, pain and then numbness

and tingling throughout his extremities. A presence in his mind, something so large it eclipsed the walls of his memory palace. Something large enough to crush it entirely.

The patches of branded skin flared with even worse pain, as if his skin was being clawed apart at the seams and burning embers forcing themselves into his body, into his veins. He was scalded from inside his skin. He wasn't sure if he managed to scream or not—his senses had gone haywire. His lungs hissed, muscles spasmed throughout his body. He felt like a branding iron had been pressed along every one of his veins, and he heard a sizzle, saw faint wisps of smoke rising from his body that suggested it wasn't all in his imagination.

A splitting headache, immense pressure from the inside of his temples until a crack reverberated through his head as his skull split under the pressure. Hot blood trickled down and something grew from both sides, weighing down his head.

His hand raised in front of his face, revealing fingers that bore patches that looked scorched to charcoal—but he wasn't the one to raise it. His body wasn't his own anymore. He couldn't find the reins to bring it back under control, his frantic messages to his muscles meant nothing.

He felt like he was watching from behind a telescope and every fiber of his being was crammed into a miniscule box, his memory palace crumpled up like a wad of paper and crushed under the foot of this towering being. He could still feel the sensations of his body, but they held a dream-like foggy quality. It was unbearably disorienting, and he realized the emotion enveloping him now was fear, more than he had felt in a very long time.

His hands raised to his face, feeling his features, and then up to his temples where they slid up along what he realized were antlers.

His body stretched long, muscles tighter and tighter with strain until something gave, popped out of place and reconnected itself. Rolling over onto his forearms, he saw his charred hands lengthening. His nails fell from their beds and sharp claws pushed into their places. His teeth felt itchy, and his tongue pressed against them until they gave and fell from his mouth, then it ran along his gums and felt where new and much sharper teeth were coming into place. A growl came from his chest, long and rumbling, and then he raised himself into a crouching position and pivoted toward the fire.

He saw more than just Will and the pyre behind him. He saw the glow of energy around Will, and the non-physical boundaries where the circle of sacred space Will had marked off ended.

Will's eyes were wide and his breath audible, but Hannibal could still smell him, and it was not the bitterness of fear—at least, not entirely. He smelled of an adrenal rush that might indicate a thrill of fear as well as excitement, but his face wore awe.

Will got onto his knees and bowed low, forehead nearly touching the ground.

"You honor me," he murmured.

Another growl rumbled in Hannibal's chest, this one softer, thoughtful. "Come here," Hannibal's mouth said, but it was not his voice. It was something hoarse and thick and

rumbling, something as thick as brambles and heavy as old oak. “Let me see what you offer to me.”

A visible shiver passed through Will, but he rose and came closer on unsteady legs.

Hannibal’s hand brushed over Will’s chest, and seeing the breadth of his hand on Will’s body made him aware of how much he had grown in size—with his fingertips at Will’s clavicle, his hand was large enough to nearly reach to the lowest of his ribs. His hand skirted down Will’s body to his hips, which he could easily grasp in his hand.

“All for you,” Will said, barely above a whisper. His pupils were enormous, and Hannibal thought it was more than the dim light. There was love in his eyes.

This received an approving rumble from the being in Hannibal’s body.

Will looked between Hannibal’s legs and a dark flush came to his cheeks. “May I prepare you?”

“You may.”

Will turned and retrieved a flask from the edge of the clearing. He poured shining liquid into his hand and the smell of olive oil filled the air. When Will kneeled between his legs, Hannibal saw that his genitals had grown even more than the rest of him, and when Will took him in hand to slick him with oil his fingers were far from touching. Though Hannibal felt like he was barely holding onto consciousness, and was certainly unable to see the being’s thoughts and plans, it became clearer what this ritual would involve.

As soon as Hannibal was hard, his hand brushed Will’s away. “Lie down so I may give your blessing,” the being said, and Will obeyed, shaking slightly and spreading his legs.

When Hannibal leaned over him and put a hand on his stomach, a bright flare of energy emanated where they touched. Will suddenly cried out and his body clenched in obvious pain, his fingers digging deep into the dark earth beneath his hands.

When the hand pulled away, Will was gasping and his eyes tearing, but he managed to say, “Thank you for your blessing. Am I ready now?”

Hannibal felt his head nod and could practically hear the race of Will’s heart.

But the energy required for his blessing had exhausted the being inside him. Hannibal knew the sensation in his body well—a clench of hunger, both physical and mental. Will had brought forth a hungry god into the mortal realm, and one body had not been enough to fully satisfy it. Not enough to sustain it now that it was eating up resources, burning fuel for its growth in the physical plane, extending itself beyond its usual limits.

One of his hands spread broad over Will’s ribcage, and Hannibal knew what would happen, seconds before it happened, while Will lay there wide-eyed and the being drew Will’s left hand to his face. He scented it for a moment, then drew it into his mouth and bit down.

Will screamed so loudly it left his ears ringing. The being possessing him did not struggle to snap the bones between his newly sharpened teeth, nor did it hesitate to crush the small bones of his hand in his powerful jaws and swallow the raw macerated flesh. Will tried to pull away but was no match for his strength, and cried out again as he took another bite, and another. Blood poured from the gaping wound where his hand had been, and Will was reduced to desperate hyperventilating sobs.

Hannibal felt a strange warmth in his stomach as the flesh was metabolized, not only the meat but also the energy, the flow of lifeblood, the personal history embedded in the bone. He felt a new rush of power and he rutted against Will's stomach as his excitement began to build, neither inhabitant of his body being perturbed by Will's current suffering—Hannibal in fact finding it a rather satisfying experience, considering what Will had put him through.

By the time he ate his way to Will's elbow, he had passed out, and Hannibal wouldn't have been surprised if the shock had killed him, though that didn't seem to be part of the plan. His hand grasped the bloody severed end of Will's arm and his palm glowed red-hot until the flesh singed and he cauterized the stump.

Now adequately fed, the being inside him guided his enormous erection into Will's unconscious body. Between the oil and the laxness of Will's body, the fit was tight but not too challenging. With their difference in size, Hannibal was thought he probably extended somewhere beneath his ribcage. Hannibal sensed this was a rare pleasure for this being, and his body hummed with pleasure as he fucked into Will's limp body with powerful strokes. At one particularly harsh jolt, Will groaned and blinked blearily up at him. His face was still tight and he reeked of the sourness of pain, but he swallowed and tilted his head back, ceding his body to be used by his god, accepting the pain.

It was not long before Will's moans of discomfort faded to shallow gasps, and he lay nearly insensate beneath Hannibal's monstrous body, awash in pain elevated to the point of religious ecstasy—his eyes open and staring, glistening damp, unwavering from the being above him.

He was still holding hazy eye contact when Hannibal spilled inside him. The air around them crackled with power, the rumbling shaking beneath them, and Will's eyes shot wide open and clear and distant with a gasp. His remaining hand went to his stomach, and as Hannibal's body rutted through the last of its orgasm, his whole body sighed in relief and he closed his eyes.

"I can feel it," he said, voice hoarse from screaming. "Where your seed has rooted in my body."

Hannibal's much larger hand settled over his, and Hannibal was swamped with the being's sense of absolute satisfaction and pride. He could feel, too, where his progeny was rooted, where it would come into being. Will's own body now carried a new glow, like the overspill of power.

"Thank you," Will whispered, and "thank you," he said again, even as Hannibal pulled free and a small amount of blood streaked down his trembling thighs.

He stroked over his stomach, cradling it as if it was already swollen with child.

Hannibal leaned back on his heels, and his bones crunched loudly. It was not quite painful, the usual sensations of his body overruled by whatever power was held inside it, but it was deeply uncomfortable, like an itch buried in his marrow, and he knew his body was beginning to crumble. It was being crushed under the weight of all the power it was trying to contain.

“I will not last much longer,” the being said, and Will nodded, though he still looked dazed and far away.

“I’ll stay here while you cross over.”

And he did. He remained by the side of them both, Hannibal and the spirit possessing him, until Hannibal’s bones all turned brittle as charcoal and his heart finally shuddered to a stop. The spirit left his body for him to gasp his last breath alone beneath splintered ribs, and then there was darkness.

For a long time, there was darkness.

But that was not the end.

Hannibal became aware of the forest around him piece by piece. First just noises, cicadas droning in utter blackness and weightlessness. Then smells, as if blindfolded and left in a pile of composting leaves. Then stick by stick, leaf by leaf, tree by tree—not all at once, but like he was trying to peer through some very dense netting, only viewing one isolated thing at a time.

The last thing to return was touch. He was not aware of having a body, as such. Textures of the forest, moss and bark and soil, remained only things to see and smell, never to feel.

Then he found his bones.

They were carefully gathered in a bundle and buried in the ground, and marked with a pile of stones. Sacred ground after all, a body that one night was inhabited by a god. Relics.

But Hannibal’s spirit had not been forced from his body entirely when he was possessed, merely encaged in the crumbled compressed fortress of his memory palace. Maybe that was why, maybe some unearthly energy had attached itself to his soul and given him some strength beyond the usual spirits. He could sense some of them, weaker ghosts and spirits who were aimless and drifting through the veil between worlds, but they didn’t have any bearing in the corporeal plane.

But with his bones discovered, he realized that he could.

He drew them together, all the torn ligaments and pitted bones. He could not have been gone terribly long, for his skin was still present and identifiable, and he was not yet terribly macerated by insects or rot—or perhaps that was yet another side effect of its spirit possession. His body was still overgrown, antlered and sharp-toothed, claws seeming even longer with his skin shrunken back.

He settled into his body, twisted between vertebrae. He pressed at the dirt around him, above him, clawed his fingers through it until he reached air. It was slow, his body weak, but he had all the time in the world to free himself.

He found his way to the fire circle, marked off with stones. The pit was empty and cold, ash covering human bone. Then he walked, feet heavy and slow, down the path he had taken to get there, winding through the forest until he saw the white farmhouse, still pristine and deceptively quaint. He caught a whiff of Will's scent on the breeze, and what was left of his mouth split wider in a grim smile.

Though he had been at a disadvantage in their earlier conflict, it seemed he was now already dead. And he would not soon forgive what Will had done.

End Notes

So this has been stewing on a back burner for ages because it turns out it's really hard to build up a properly creepy atmosphere when the damn protagonist doesn't get scared by anything. So fuck you Hannibal and your ridiculous psychopath brain, lmao.

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